

The Baptism of Christ Sunday/January 10, 2021

Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11;

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Jesus' Epiphany

Today, on this Sunday in the church, we celebrate the Baptism of Christ Sunday. Here we engage on a quick leap in time from Jesus' birth at Christmas (Dec. 25), to remembering the visit of the Magi to see the Christ child, on Epiphany, 12 days later (Jan. 6), to Jesus as a full blown adult, coming to John the Baptist in the Jordan River for baptism (the first Sunday after Epiphany). It is enough to make our liturgical heads spin, but appropriate, as we now must begin to recall the early ministry of Jesus, his calling of disciples, his teachings, his healings, his ministry, before embarking on the long, inward looking, self-examining and penitent season of Lent.

So today, we once again, as we did in Advent, get a look, one last look, at John the Baptist. John, who knew his calling to be *"the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!"* His was a baptism of repentance, for the forgiveness of sins. His intent was to *purify* the people, the nation, in preparation for a coming great judgment of God, foretold by the ancient prophets.

For Mark and the other gospel writers, John is the bridge between the old and the new, the ancient prophets to the coming Messiah, who is about to be known in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. John looks and speaks like a prophet of old, he is out in the *wilderness*, the place of Israel's wanderings between Egypt and the promised land, he baptizes in the Jordan, the territorial marker between the wilderness and the land of milk and honey. He is the one that connects Jesus to Israel's past and points forward to the not-yet materialized Kingdom of God that Jesus will seek to usher in. He situates Jesus in the past, present and future of God's dealings with humanity.

But Mark doesn't spend a lot of time focusing on John but moves quickly to his primary concern in his gospel, to Jesus, who comes to John to be baptized. And his description is wonderfully wrapped in very tactile, sensual, earthy words. We have the flowing waters of the Jordan River, we have John's camel skin clothing and his diet of locusts and honey, there is a reference to sandals, the imagery of a bird for the Spirit, and as one commentator put it, *"an interesting weather phenomenon to describe the tearing open of the heavens (Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1, p.236, Elton W. Brown).*

This is no ethereal, other worldly event that is happening. No, this is real, right here, an earth bound, touchable and knowable thing that is taking place. Mark wants us to be present in the moment, right there with John and Jesus and the crowd around them, feeling the rushing flow of the Jordan waters around our knees.

But it is ultimately all about Jesus. And in Mark's version of this story, it is a personal experience between Jesus and God. Mark writes, *'And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* Unlike the other gospels that seem to suggest that others may have seen and heard these things, Mark has Jesus

receiving this message from the heavens himself. It is personal, it is interior, it speaks to Jesus' self understanding and gives him a new identity through which he will begin his ministry.

And here of course, we find ourselves in the midst of a theological conundrum. The question that early church leaders, scholars and theologians have wrestled with for centuries. Did Jesus receive the Holy Spirit here at the Jordan or was it a part of him since his birth? Was he "*adopted*" as some have described it, by God as God's Son, here at the baptism, or was Jesus Son of God, "*Emmanuel*" (*God with us*), at his beginning, as proclaimed in the Christmas birth narratives of Matthew and Luke and even more so in the prologue of John's gospel?

We won't seek to answer that question here but what I hope we might ponder is what Jesus' experience of this event was for him. And then, to what degree can and do we experience a similar thing in our own lives?

It seems fitting that we celebrate this story in Jesus' life in this season of Epiphany. For while Epiphany is the day commemorating the coming of the Magi to see the infant Christ child, and the revelation (theophany) of God incarnate in Jesus Christ and his manifestation to the Gentiles, or to the whole world, it is also a time when we seek to know in our own lives, epiphanies that provide insight and new beginnings for ourselves in our relationship with God.

So we must ask, did Jesus experience an epiphany there as he was baptized in the Jordan River by John? I wonder what Jesus' intentions or hopes were as he walked from his home in Nazareth, out into the Judean wilderness, to that place on the Jordan River, where John had been doing his work.

Now Jesus was about 30 years of age (according to Luke 3:23) when he began his ministry. We believe he had taken up the work of a carpenter, having supposedly learned that trade from his father Joseph. But we don't have much of any information about his young adult years, what he was doing, where he lived, what education he was getting.

I have my own theories that he perhaps was sent for schooling with the Essenes, a small Jewish sect who may have been the authors of the *Dead Sea Scrolls* discovered at Qumran. They gave themselves over to the study of the scriptures and were awaiting the coming great judgment of God and of the Messiah. And while there is no clear evidence of this, there are many theories that perhaps Jesus and perhaps his cousin John (the Baptist) were sent there in their youth. It is also suggested by some that Jesus may have himself, been a disciple of John. For John did have a ministry and disciples of his own, this is known.

Jesus would have certainly been affected by the social and political events of his day. It is known that in the time of his childhood, the Romans crucified hundreds of Jewish rebels, many of whom would have been seen hung on crosses along the roads near Nazareth where Jesus grew up. He would have known the desperation of his people, the longing for release from their oppression, the hopes that lingered in their hearts. The hopes that God would save them.

We don't know all that may have prepared Jesus for this experience at his baptism, this epiphany and realization that he was beloved of God and filled with God's Holy Spirit. But we know he accepted it in humility and spent a period of discernment, the 40 days in the wilderness struggling with the demons of his own life, coming to grips with what he understood his life and

ministry were to be about. Committing himself to God, continuing the work of John the Baptist and the prophets and to making God's realm a reality on earth.

Like Jesus, we each have many things that have influenced our lives and which have brought us to the place that we are. We live in a time of great uncertainty. The Coronavirus plagues all our people, the world around, and is forcing us to re-think the ways of being and traditions that we have developed over time. The political upheaval of our nation, the challenges to our democracy, the assault on the sense of truth and the degradation of trust that we place in our elected officials has caused us to live in an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, unlike any other time in our history.

In this season of Epiphany, as we think about Jesus' life and his struggle to know who he was being called to be and to do by God's Spirit, may we take some time to ask the questions of ourselves: What is God calling *me* to?

What are the inner hopes and dreams that I have that are awaiting to be born in *me*?

How must *I* change my life in order to allow the Holy Spirit to live fully through me?

How can I listen to voices dissonant with mine and make a way to find common ground?

How is God calling me to make God's realm a reality on earth in this time and place?

For all of us, like Jesus, are Beloved of God and are God's children. May this knowledge of who we are, be our epiphany in this time and may we celebrate our own baptisms as we celebrate God's love for us all! Amen.